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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001513

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ON EVE OF U.S. TRIP, HARIRI LOOKS AT
PRESIDENTIAL OPTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 1511

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) On 9/28, MP Saad Hariri said he would have four requests for USG officials during his upcoming Washington consultations: first, accelerated support for the Lebanese army and police, including highly visible equipment to put Hizballah off balance; second, immediate embrace of Lebanon's next president, to keep him focused on the west rather than Syria; third, some resettlement of Nahr al-Barid Palestinians in the West Bank; fourth, transfer of Sheba' Farms to UN custody after presidential elections. On elections, Hariri said that he would back "all the way" March 14 presidential candidates Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb. He thought there was a slim chance of getting Lahoud, his preferred choice, if the Saudis would be willing to intervene with the Iranians. But Hariri also hinted at a fall-back position, saying that the cost to Lebanon of electing a candidate with only a 50 percent-plus one majority of MPs may be too great. While noting that his March 14 partners are opposed to compromise, he mused about whether Charles Rizk, Michel Khoury, or Robert Ghanem might be fall-back consensus choices. (As we are reporting septel, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea is deeply worried that Hariri is rushing too quickly to back Ghanem.) Over dinner with the Ambassador on 9/28, Ghattas Khoury, advisor to Hariri, elaborated on these themes. Khoury noted that Hariri intended to become prime minister after presidential elections but may decline if a president is elected without consensus support. End summary.

HARIRI'S PLANNED TALKING POINTS
FOR WASHINGTON MEETINGS

12. (C) The Ambassador met one-on-one with MP Saad Hariri on 9/28. Previewing his talking points for his upcoming consultations in Washington, Hariri said that he would emphasize how important USG leadership and support has been in Lebanon's independence struggle and how much the Lebanese appreciate Washington's attention. Beyond expressions of thanks, he said that he plans to make four requests of USG officials:

-- First, the USG should accelerate and increase its assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF), in order to take the argument from Hizballah that only its weapons can protect Lebanon. The Ambassador briefed Hariri on the USD 250 million-plus commitment to the LAF in FY07 and the USD 60 million INL program for the ISF, about to be signed. All well and good, Hariri responded, but the programs need to include highly visible hardware -- helicopters, missiles, planes -- that would demonstrate to the Lebanese people a real strategic upgrading to the security services, to weaken Hizballah's arguments. Hariri said that USG assistance should address the "psychological" needs of the Lebanese to see physical evidence of the LAF's increasing capacity.

-- Second, the USG should immediately and strongly embrace the next president of Lebanon, even if he is less than perfect, in order to root him solidly in the west. The next president should see that his support comes from the moderate Arabs and the international community. Such support will make him less vulnerable to Syrian pressure and less likely to turn to Syria and Iran for backing. "He should see the benefits of being part of the international community and not part of the Axis of Evil."

-- Third, the USG should back some resettlement of displaced Palestinian refugees from Nahr al-Barid in the West Bank rather than Lebanon. Given Lebanese hysteria about permanent implantation ("tawteen") of the Sunni Palestinians in Lebanon, moving a few thousand out of Lebanon would be the most effective way of strengthening the new president, the new cabinet, and even PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas. The Ambassador suggested that Hariri keep his expectations in check on this point.

-- Four, the USG, after a new Lebanese president is elected

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and a new cabinet sworn in, should strengthen the new administration vis-a-vis Hizballah by seeing that Sheba' Farms is transferred to U.S. custody, thus depriving Hizballah of another pretext for its weapons. The Ambassador urged Hariri not to raise the Sheba' Farms point, given the unlikelihood that, without seriousness first on dealing with Hizballah's arms, Lebanon would see its request fulfilled.

13. (C) Over the longer term, Hariri said, the international community should brace itself for another Paris III-style donors conference. Once there is a credible new president in place and a credible cabinet accepted by most Lebanese, then Lebanon can move aggressively to implement the social and economic reforms proposed for Paris III but which are now largely stalled because of the ongoing political crisis. Depending on the audience, Hariri said that he may raise the need for debt reduction linked to performance on reform with Washington officials.

BACKING NASSIB AND BOUTROS
"ALL THE WAY" TO BAABDA PALACE

14. (C) As for his bottom-line thinking on Lebanon's upcoming presidential elections, Hariri claimed to be backing "all the way" March 14 presidential candidates Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb. He said that there was still a slim possibility of broader consensus behind Nassib, who he indicated is his top preference. To get Nassib by consensus, the Saudis will have to talk to the Iranians and get them on board. The Ambassador asked whether the Saudis were willing to try. Laughing, Saad said, "I need to have a serious conversation with King Abdullah." He urged the U.S. to help make sure the Saudis were playing a strong role in pushing for a March 14-backed president.

15. (C) As for Boutros, Saad accused Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri of trying to trick him in a recent Berri-Hariri

meeting. Berri, aware of the lack of personal chemistry between Saad and Boutros, told Hariri that it might just be possible to get a consensus behind Boutros, but not Nassib. Hariri told the Speaker to try with both. In Hariri's analysis, Berri was hoping to provoke Hariri into vetoing Harb himself, thus splitting the March 14 bloc. While not blocking Harb, Hariri claimed at the same time to be evincing little enthusiasm for Harb, an approach Harb asked him to adopt to help lure Berri and Hizballah into backing him. "If I am too enthusiastic about Boutros," Hariri said, then Berri will become more suspicious.

BUT HINTING AT A FALL-BACK
STRATEGY OF A CONSENSUS PRESIDENT

¶16. (C) The Ambassador asked what happens if March 14 cannot get a broader consensus behind either Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb. "We'll have to go for 50 (percent) plus one," Hariri said. But he said that he was not sure that March 14 allies realized the cost Lebanon would have to pay for that confrontational approach. "The consequences will be great," Hariri said. If the March 8-Aoun bloc chooses to respond by electing its own president or appointing a competing cabinet, the country will be split. Hariri mused about three potential fall-back candidates: former Central Bank Governor Michel Khoury (son of Lebanon's first president), Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, and MP Robert Ghanem. "I wonder," Hariri said, whether getting broader backing behind one of them wouldn't be better than electing a president with only an absolute majority, given the problems such an election would cause. "But I'll never abandon my allies," he said, in reference to the less compromising thinking of Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt.

¶17. (C) Hariri described his recent consultations as "excellent." Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, he claimed, admitted that Nassib Lahoud was the best candidate. As for Berri, he wanted to talk about principles to guide the next cabinet. According to Hariri, Berri supported having a cabinet program based on UNSCR 1701, the four issues agreed upon unanimously during the spring 2006 National Dialogue sessions, implementation of the Taif agreement, and return to the state of armistice with Israel. Berri's red lines for his cabinet statement, Hariri said, were UNSCR 1559 and Hizballah's arms,

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with Berri insisting that neither 1559 nor Hizballah's arms be mentioned explicitly in the next cabinet program. (Note: The issue of UNSCR 1559 has come up with increasing frequency by March 8 supporters, who argue that UNSCR 1559 will be irrelevant after presidential elections. At that point, they say, what's left of UNSCR 1559 is subsumed into UNSCR 1701, and UNSCR 1559 files can be closed. We may want to have the lawyers start examining this question, to help head off this line or reasoning before it is broadly accepted here. End note.)

HARIRI'S ADVISOR ELABORATES,
HINTS AT SAAD'S OWN AMBITIONS

¶18. (C) Over a one-on-one dinner hosted by the Ambassador on 9/28, Hariri's advisor Ghattas Khoury (who plans to travel with Hariri to Washington but not attend the meetings) reiterated many of the same points, with the Ambassador cautioning Ghattas to drop the Sheba' Farms request and lower expectations on the Nahr al-Barid resettlement proposal. Khoury also talked of a nascent rapprochement with Michel Aoun (see reftel), which had suffered a set-back just an hour earlier: Khoury, on behalf of Hariri, was supposed to see Aoun; at the last minute, Aoun diverted Khoury to Aoun's son-in-law and advisor Gebran Bassil instead. Hariri took offense at this bait-and-switch.

¶19. (C) Khoury confirmed that Hariri fully intends to become

prime minister in the cabinet to be formed after presidential elections. Asked whether the Saudis were on board, Khoury responded that he presumed so. But Hariri may decline the office, Khoury said, if the president is elected with only a March 14 absolute majority. In that case, the risks of failure are so great, for there could be two competing presidents and two competing cabinets. Hariri wants to be part of a solution to unity the country, not head of a cabinet that divides Lebanon.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) As we are reporting septel, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea is convinced and deeply worried that, once it is clear that Nassib Lahoud will never win the presidency by consensus, Hariri will shift his support to MP Robert Ghanem, one of the three potential fall-back choices he mentioned to us. (We think either of the other two fall-backs are better choices than Ghanem.) With us, Hariri put on a good show about backing either Nassib or Boutros Harb all the way. But, given his ambitions to become prime minister and given the experience of his father's premiership (when the PM far exceeded the president in importance), we could see how Hariri might be tempted by a weak president like Ghanem, whose election would be a preferable way for Hariri to start his premiership compared to a chaotic situation with two presidents or two governments.

¶11. (C) Thus, in the context of Geagea's subsequent remarks about Hariri's private hopes for a Ghanem president, we would not be surprised if Hariri asks USG officials to intervene with his hard-line March 14 ally Walid Jumblatt (who will be in Washington less than two weeks after Hariri) to urge a compromise on the presidency. Jumblatt, in turn, may ask for USG help in ensuring March 14 gains the presidency. Our message, we believe, should be that March 14 needs to stay united.

¶12. (C) As for Hariri's hope to become Lebanon's next prime minister, we strongly urge that Washington interlocutors not raise with him any hesitations we may have. The Saudis are best placed to give Hariri honest career advice. Just as we aren't picking Lebanon's next president, we believe that we shouldn't be seen as picking Lebanon's next premier, particularly not at Saad's expense when we need his active engagement on the Lebanese scene. Indeed, in need of all the help they can muster at this critical time before presidential elections, March 14 leaders, we believe, should hear from Hariri when he returns that we remain strongly supportive of them. Finally, we suggest muting our praise for PM Siniora or putting it in the context of giving credit to Hariri who (with our encouragement) sagely picked Siniora back in 2005: Hariri is extremely sensitive to the profile

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and stature Siniora has gained over the last two-plus years. If we need Siniora to be involved in the new cabinet to be formed after presidential elections, then Hariri should not perceive him as a threat to his own influence and prestige.
FELTMAN